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## DUNSINANE REVISITED: Medicine in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

RALPH F. SETT, B.S.

MORE than four hundred medical allusions have been tallied from the works of William Shakespeare.<sup>1,2,5</sup> They range from pithy sayings that chide the profession to poetic descriptions to numerous diseases and their treatment. Some attribute these medical references to Shakespeare's friendship with his son-in-law, who was a physician, as well as to Shakespeare's interest in the medical literature of the period. Others classify them merely as a technique of the dramatic artist. In any case, Shakespeare's plays are important in the history of medicine because they contain a vivid picture of the profession during one of the most colorful eras in England's history. This is reflected not only in casual references to medicine, but also in the characterizations and imagery of the plays. Therefore, disregarding the caution of one of Shakespeare's medical characters:

Were I from Dunsinane away and clear,  
Profit again should hardly draw me here.  
(Act V, Scene 4)

Dunsinane shall be revisited, and the field of medicine discussed as

suggested by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Knowledge of medicine was sparse, and for the most part unscientific, in Shakespeare's England. It was expounded by numerous charlatans and quacks as well as by honest physicians.<sup>5</sup>

That there were dedicated men of science in the profession is substantiated by the character of the Scottish doctor summoned to treat Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare presents him as a skilled historicist, as he studies the patient and questions one of the Queen's maids:  
When was it she last walk'd?

In this slumbry agitation, besides her walking and other actual performances, what at any time, have you heard her say?

Hark! She speaks, I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

(Act V, Scene 1)

His history-taking ability should be noted by all students new to the art of physical diagnosis. Furthermore he is adherent to the pledge of keeping personal all matters divulged to him during consultation. When the maid, fearful for her own safety, refuses to give him more details of the Queen's illness, he tells her:

You may, to me; and 'tis most meet you should.

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The doctor has been praised because he realizes his limitations, and prescribes as best he can without resorting to the panaceas of the charlatans:<sup>1,2</sup>

This disease is beyond my practice; yet I have known those which have walk'd in their sleep, who have died holily in their beds.

More needs she the divine than the physician. —

God, God forgive us all! Look after her; Remove from her the means of all annoyance.

And still keep eyes upon her. —

So, good night:

My mind she has mated,  
and amaz'd my sight.

(Act V, Scene 1)

The doctor's comments show the widely held belief that mental disturbances were due to the possession of evil spirits. When Macbeth inquires about his wife's condition and asks him to cure her:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,

Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,

And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that  
perilous stuff

Which weighs upon the heart?

The doctor gives the following reply:

Therein the patient

Must minister to himself.

(Act V, Scene 3)

Macbeth's adversaries think they have the proper potion in the person of Malcolm:

Meet we the med'cine of the sickly weal;  
And with him pour we, in our country's  
purge,

Each drop of us.

(Act V, Scene 2)

Because of the belief in the magical powers of herbs, laymen competed with the apothecaries in preparing innumerable concoctions.<sup>5</sup> That Shakespeare was aware of the potency of herbs is

apparent in Banquo's comments following the encounter with the three witches:

Were such things here, as we do speak  
about,

Or have we eaten on the insane root,

That takes the reason prisoner?

(Act I, Scene 3)

This root which produced insanity has been thought to have been hemlock, henbane, or the deadly nightshade. There was also a superstition that basil, another herb, led to the propagation of scorpions in the brain,<sup>3</sup> and this is the explanation for the following allusion in *Macbeth*:

O! full of scorpions is my mind,  
dear wife!

(Act III, Scene 2)

Prescriptions were not filled by herbs alone. The first *Pharmacopeia*, published in 1618, listed ninety-one animal products recommended as treatment for numerous ills. Frequently a dozen or more ingredients were incorporated into the medical preparation; Galen's Mithridatic, a universal antidote against all poisons, contained one hundred ingredients. A compilation of sundry components by Meek revealed the following: snake skins, scorpions, wood lice; teeth, claws, hooves, and bones of animals; human bones, urine, menstrual fluid, and feces.<sup>2</sup> Such bizarre remedies continued to be found in the *Pharmacopeia* until 1746. Indeed as Meek has stated, "The witches' brew is a poetical version of the medical prescription of the day." Dancing around the boiling cauldron, the weird hags represent the supernatural elements or superstitions which misled the honest physi-

cians and filled the coffers of the charlatans:

Round about the cauldron go,  
In the poison'd entrails throw —  
Toad, that under cold stone  
Days and nights has thirty-one  
Swelter'd venom, sleeping got,  
Boil thou first i' th' charmed pot.  
Fillet of a fenny snake,  
In the cauldron boil and bake;  
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,  
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.  
Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf;  
Witches' mummy; maw, and gulf,  
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark;  
Root of hemlock, digg'd i' th' dark;  
Liver of blaspheming Jew;  
Gall of goat, and slips of yew,  
Sliver'd in the moon's eclipse;  
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips;  
Finger of birth-strangled babe,  
Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,  
Make the gruel thick and slab;  
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,  
For th' ingredients of our cauldron.

(Act IV, Scene 1)

The use of wine in the machinations of Macbeth and his shrewish wife reinforces the impression that excessive drinking was not highly regarded by Shakespeare:

... his two chamberlains  
Will I with wine and wassail so convince,  
That memory, the warder of the brain,  
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason  
A limbeck only: when in swinish sleep  
Their drenched natures lie, as in a death,  
What cannot you and I perform upon  
Th' unguarded Duncan?

(Act I, Scene 7)

The old anatomists believed that the brain contained three rather than four ventricles. The third ventricle was the seat of memory, which was thought to warn the reason of attack; intoxication interfered with this activity. The imagery of "swinish sleep" confers a brutish appearance to the drunken chamberlains, and this is strengthened with a pun on

"drenched," a drench being a dose of medicine administered to an animal.

The study of insanity, which is not unique to *Macbeth*, but also found in *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Hamlet*, has led to the view that Shakespeare had great psychiatric insight. The ability to expose abnormal psychology and its degenerating effect on character is seen in the artist's conception of both Macbeth and his queen. Macbeth may have become the victim of hallucinations:

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand?

(Act II, Scene 1)

After he has stabbed Duncan, Macbeth hears voices:

Methought, I heard a voice cry,  
"Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder Sleep," . . .

(Act II, Scene 2)

Pomeranz describes Macbeth as a paranoiac suffering from delusions of persecution, hallucinations, and melancholia, and finally emerging as a homicidal maniac:<sup>4</sup>

The castle of Macduff I will surprise;  
Seize upon Fife, give to the edge  
o' the sword

His wife, his babies, and all  
unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line . . .

This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.  
But no more sights!

(Act IV, Scene 1)

The subject of dreams did not escape the scrutinizing eye of Shakespeare. Macbeth is besieged by nightmares:

Now o'er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams  
abuse

The curtain'd sleep . . .

(Act II, Scene 1)

In the affliction of these terrible dreams,  
That shake us nightly,

(Act III, Scene 2)

Pomeranz's interpretation implies that these nightmares are a part of the mental deterioration of the main character;<sup>4</sup> however, at the beginning of the second act Banquo has the following comment on dreams:

Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that  
nature  
Gives way to in repose!

(Act II, Scene 1)

Yet Banquo is not meant to appear deranged in the play; the significance of this is perhaps in the Bard's realization that mental abnormalities are relative, a view not infrequently held today. The culmination of Shakespeare's study of mental derangement is found in Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene (Act V, Scene 1), the contents of which are so familiar that this aspect of the scene need not be documented with excerpts of her lamentations.

While discussing psychogenic phenomena, one's attention is drawn to Shakespeare's descriptions of fear and its physiologic manifestations. Macbeth's fear of the means by which he might achieve the status proffered by the witches prompts the following lines:

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,  
And make my seated heart knock at my  
ribs,  
Against the use of nature?

(Act I, Scene 3)

Awaiting the attack of Macduff, Malcolm and the English forces at Dunsinane, Macbeth tells a servant:

Go prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,  
Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers,  
patch?

Death of thy soul! Those linen cheeks of  
thine  
Are counselors to fear. What soldiers,  
whye-face?

(Act V, Scene 3)

And shortly after this the bold tyrant reacts to the women's cry, discovering Lady Macbeth's suicide, in the following manner:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.  
The time has been, my senses would have  
cool'd

To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of  
hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and  
stir,  
As life were in't.

(Act V, Scene 5)

Knowledge of physiology was incomplete and inaccurate during Shakespeare's time.<sup>5</sup> The thoughts of physiologists were often directed toward the problem of reproduction of either sex at will. There is evidence in *Macbeth* that Shakespeare believed in an ancient theory that the more vigorous of the two parents produced the opposite sex:<sup>1</sup>

Bring forth men-children only!  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males.

(Act I, Scene 7)

The value of sleep is referred to in *Macbeth* in two places, and its therapeutic effect on the mind is indicated:

You lack the season of all natures, sleep.  
(Act III, Scene 5)

— the innocent Sleep;  
Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleeve  
of care  
The death of each day's life, sore  
labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's  
second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast: —

(Act II, Scene 2)

Thus, a glimpse of medicine in Shakespeare's England has been presented as seen in *Macbeth*. This glimpse was possible because

LINACRE QUARTERLY

of a man who possessed the genius of being both spectator and participant of his era, William Shakespeare.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>1</sup> Field, B. R.: *Medical Thoughts of Shakespeare*. London, Easton, Andrews and Clifton, 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Meek, W. J.: *Medico-Historical Papers: Medicine in Shakespeare*. Madison, 1954, pp. 372-398.

<sup>3</sup> Muir, K., ed.: *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare: Macbeth*, 8th ed. London, Methuen and Co., 1957.

<sup>4</sup> Pomeranz, H.: *Medicine in the Shakespearean Plays and Dickens' Doctors*, New York, Powell Publications, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> Ruggiero, A.: *William Shakespeare, M.D.*, *Int. Rec. Med.*, 173:524-536, Aug. 1960.

## *Federation Executive Board Meeting Scheduled*

The Executive Board of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds will meet November 30 and December 1, 1962. Time: 9:30 a.m. Place: Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, California. The officers of the National Federation and one delegate from each active constituent Guild comprising the Board will conduct business.